

UPDATE 78

Royal Commission – Retired Bishop Geoffrey Robinson



Monday 24 August 2015 – Day 1

Retired Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, former Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney, is the sole witness in this hearing, Case Study 31.

His evidence will be used in a public hearing in early 2017 into the broader response of the Catholic Church to child sexual abuse by clergy and religious.

Bishop Robinson, who was a bishop for 31 years in the Sydney Archdiocese and a priest for 54 years, has spoken out and written widely urging "profound and enduring change" and a more compassionate approach by the Church to victims of abuse.

During today's hearing Bishop Robinson gave evidence across a range of issues including the history and development of *Towards Healing*, his membership of the College of Consultors of the Archdiocese of Sydney, the operation of Encompass Australasia and his involvement with the senior Vatican officials.

Bishop Robinson told the Commission the first time he became aware of the issue of child sexual abuse in the Church was during a 1987 presentation made to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

"It was a considerable shock to me, and I believe, to many of the other bishops as well, because for the first time it showed us that this was a large-scale problem present in most places and in most countries...I really had no idea that priests could do such things."

Bishop Robinson was subsequently head of the Bishops Committee for Professional Standards and had an integral role in the development of *Towards Healing*. In early evidence Bishop Robinson talked about the rationale behind the development of *Towards Healing*:

"Well, we certainly needed a response to claims of abuse... I quickly became aware that the majority of complainants did not wish to go to the police. Now, they gave various reasons. There were two in particular. One was the fear that if they went to the police, their particular case would become public, and ... some of them, even their husband or wife didn't know they had been abused.

"The second great fear was of being cross-examined by an opposing barrister... I felt the church can't say to them, "Go to the police, and if you are not willing to do that, "tough luck". You know, that wasn't good enough. We had to give some response. We had to hear and deal with their complaint.

Bishop Robinson said the introduction of the Melbourne Response by then Archbishop Pell in 1996 following an ultimatum from then Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett, had come as a 'bombshell' to him and the Australian bishops and religious leaders. He said that, while the Melbourne Response had some good aspects, its announcement in the weeks prior to the release of *Towards Healing* had destroyed the unity of the Church on the issue of the response to child sexual abuse.

Bishop Robinson said *Towards Healing* was pastoral and relied on getting the priest to admit the offence and to accept that he couldn't continue to work as a priest.

“And at first, we were quite successful in that. It later fell down because both sides changed.

“There were priests out there who felt that the bishops had thrown them to the wolves, and so as soon as they heard an accusation they would approach the priest who had been accused and say ‘Admit nothing, say nothing, get yourself a lawyer, defend yourself. Don't admit to anything’.

“While on the other side, there were victims’ groups who were saying to victims, ‘Don't go near these people. Get yourself a lawyer and go for the biggest sum of money you can get’.

“And we found when it was lawyer versus lawyer, we weren't getting anywhere. The processes were falling down. It was not achieving what it once had”.

When asked about the short comings in *Towards Healing* Bishop Robinson acknowledged that in 1996 he had to be practical about what would be accepted by the then members of ACBC and what would not. He acknowledged he would have liked *Towards Healing* to be more independent of the Church and for payment of compensation to be moved away from the control of individual bishops.

After lunch, Bishop Robinson was asked to comment on a footnote to a discussion paper of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000 which said ‘crimes’ committed by clerics such as breaching the seal of the confessional were more serious than paedophilia, he said this was evidence of “a whole mind-set that I can't grasp”.

Bishop Robinson also gave evidence about the difficulties faced by Encompass, a psychological treatment program developed for clerics as part of the Church's efforts to prevent child sexual abuse. He said that although Encompass treatment was cheaper than sending personnel overseas, the cost was still prohibitive for some dioceses. This and the stigma attached meant that no-one - wanted to touch the subject of sexual abuse and Encompass became financially unsustainable.

Bishop Robinson also gave evidence about his view of the likely factors contributing to the incidence of child sexual abuse in the church. He was specifically asked about celibacy of priests, the role of women in the Church, the psychology of clerical offenders and, the lack of professionalism in the Church. He expressed the view that these aspects needed to be further investigated.

He concluded his evidence by saying the issue of child sexual abuse is a massive problem in the Catholic Church. He renewed his call for the Church to hold a Vatican Council to look at the issue.

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